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CHAPTER TEN

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ONE living force had continued at the old house, however, from the time it was built right to the present day. This was my mother's elder sister, our Kyi-Kyi Lon, the same who had thrown herself on the ground at first beholding the muddy fields of Thaton. She had never been to an English school like my mother and indeed had known no other home but the old house all her life. My Kyi-Kyi (aunt-elder-than-parent) is unmarried. The story of how she remained unmarried is stamped with her character.

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My eldest aunt was married and died after bearing three children, and the bereaved husband came back to Grandfather and asked for the hand of another aunt so that the children should not lack a loving mother's care. This aunt also died, and the hardy widower again returned to Grandfather. Grandfather might have been persuaded to give another daughter in marriage but Kyi-Kyi Lon, who was next on the list, stamped her feet and shooed the widower away, regardless of the belief that a man who survives two wives is outlived by his third. She inherited my grandfather's spirit and vitriolic temper, and a very lively tongue. When she was young she was round and sturdy and was therefore called Ma Lon, Miss Round. With years of spinsterhood, roundness disappeared, the sturdiness developed into a masculine toughness and her natural abilities turned to business management; her feet broadened and she could tramp for miles; with her sharp tongue she could make men quail. It was our Kyi-Kyi who looked after our rubber estates for us. My mother stood in awe of her, and it was a beautiful lesson in gentle humanity to watch the sisters together. My mother had two aspects to her nature. She had an all-round ability equal to Kyi-Kyi Lon's, but there was a gentleness which tempered every masculine ability she possessed. This tempering was always imposed above. In my aunt's presence, the lower stratum automatically disappeared, because Kyi-Kyi, who quarrelled with everyone else, loved my mother like a child who must be scolded and looked after. She therefore devoted her life to our interests.

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My aunt never learnt English, and derided the refined tones of English pronunciation. She never made the slightest concession to any foreign tongue. Surrounded by a world in which products and institutions bore English names, she took delight in pronouncing unavoidable terms with the broadest Burmese accent. "Ine-Si-Et", she would

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say for I.C.S., with a marked emphasis on the last word which is pronounced with a glottal stop, and thus pronounced means "cracked".¹⁸⁶ After listening to a conversation in English she would seize on what she heard most often, "You know" and "I know". "You no, I no, *huit-yak no, tha-hko ma-la-naing*," she would say, punning on the word "know", which in Burmese means to wake up. "You wake, I wake, two awake—the thieves cannot come."¹⁹⁶

Kyi-Kyi lived an independent life; she had inherited a share of the house, among other things, and she lived there on what was due to her from the management of our property. Between her and one servant maid, the old house was kept spotless. A meal was cooked every day for the monastery, and Kyi-Kyi was on very amiable social terms with the monks and the nuns who lived close by. Everyone in Thaton knew her, the young men admired her for her lively wit and the women called her a harridan for it. Between visiting us and business and religious good works and scolding everyone, my Kyi-Kyi spent a busy life.

She was so different from my mother. My mother never smoked⁵⁸⁹ or chewed betel, but when Kyi-Kyi came we were treated to watching her roll her cheroots. She had the *hsay*, mixture, in a bowl. It was a compound of chopped tobacco leaves, the stem and pith of the *ohn-nè* (coconut flower), and jaggery or sugar. It was a sticky mixture. The wrapping leaves—the leaves of a tree called the *thanat*—were in a cream cracker biscuit tin. In a small cane sieve-tray she had a number of old *a-si-hkans*, stubs of solid ends, about 1½ to 2 inches long; and on a piece of paper was some boiled rice for sticking. She rolled the mixture in the leaf, tucked the edges of the narrower end neatly in and stuck²⁷⁶



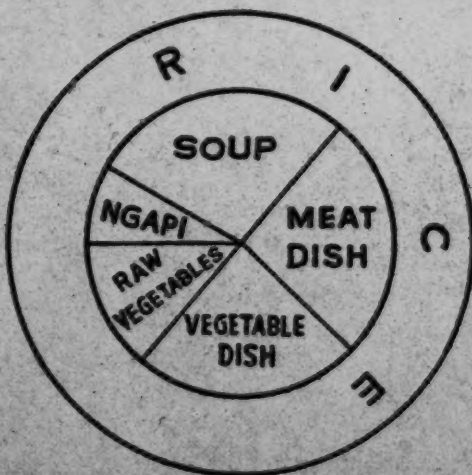
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CHAPTER ELEVEN

IF my aunt's character and speech were full of sharpnesses with 252
 which she jabbed at people, they will all be forgiven her for the 589.
 sensuous delights which she provided for one and all with her
 qualities as a cook and an expert on foods. She was such a wonderful
 cook, she used to be asked to supervise at *a-hlus*, the mass cooking for
 free feasting of clergy and townspeople. She regarded the feasting of
 others as her one indulgence in life. In all other respects she econom-
 ized and denied her tastes like all Burmese spinster ladies, but in the
 matter of food she considered that we did not live lavishly or plenteously
 enough. She knew the rarest tit-bits, the physiological effects of eating
 any particular food, the properties of leaves, the times of year when the
 most ordinary foods had the greatest beneficent influence.

The field of Burmese food is a rich territory, and so little explored 264
 by foreigners who will normally hear only of the ngapi, rice and salad 511
 leaves of the poorest people, that I am tempted to write a whole chapter
 on it, as dedication to my Kyi-Kyi Lon. The composition of the
 average plain Burmese meal is : boiled white rice; the *hingyo* or soup; the
 ngapi or condiment dish; the *to-so-ya*, "dipper", or raw green vegetable
 dish which may be classed as a naked salad; the dressed or cooked
 vegetable dish; and the *hin*, the "curry" of meat or fish to provide the
 gravy. Roughly, the importance and quantity of each dish may be
 shown thus, diagrammatically :

If any visitors are expect-
 ed there may be one or two
 other dishes, but this is the
 standard meal and is enjoyed
 by all classes of people ex-
 cept the poorest; a-so-ya
 mins, rich men, clerks and
 petty traders all eat the same,
 more or less. For a family
 of four or five persons two
 such meals can be provided
 daily at a cost of about Re.
 1/- or Re. 1/4 in an average
 district town or village.



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sp. on, all satisfactorily arranged, the formalities are not yet over. A lucky day has to be sought from the horoscopes of the two chief parties, but beyond this there are a number of obstacles which must on no account be overlooked. In the first place, with the pious the same rule prevails as in England, that no marriages should take place in Lent. This cuts upwards of three months out of the year immediately. Unfortunately a number of persons are so completely in the world of *kāma*, the seat of the passions, that they care very little whether it is the season of the *Wā* or not. But almost every one, whether pious or not, considers well the character of the months as given in the marriage *linga*. The year begins with *Tagu*, commencing about the middle of April. In this month and *Kasôn* the next, couples marrying will be very rich. In *Nayôn* they will love one another. Those marrying in *Waso* and *Wagaung*, when Lent begins, will die or be grievously sick. If the young pair are so mad as to brave the danger, their parents should stop the marriage. In *Tawthalin*, *Na'daw*, and *Pyatho*, if you marry, you will lose goods and money. In *Thadingyut* you will have slaves, children, and money as much as you want. In *Tasaungmôn* slaves, buffaloes, cattle, and furniture in abundance, will flow in upon the married couple. *Tabodwè* and *Tabaung* are very unlucky for those who tempt Hymen. There will be no children, or only girls, and misfortunes will be frequent. Nevertheless though there is all this trouble in getting a wife to your mind, as well as lucky in time of birth, worldly goods, and season of marriage, there are very few Burmans, not in the sacred order, who are not married before they are twenty, and happily married too. As the popular saying puts it—

Ye hnin nga,
Lin hnin maya.

Fish to the water,
Man to Eve's daughter.

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oranges, guava fruit, mangosteen fruit - together worth about forty or fifty rupees. When he arrived at Pathaw this was distributed among the members of his family, and also some relatives and the phonygis. On one such trip he made Rs. 2700/- which he carried back hidden away in a jar of salt.

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U Myaing never came in to Rangoon purely for a visit. Besides bringing down fish, U Myaing also came to Rangoon before the war to buy some motor parts and accessories such as tyres, tubes, etc. which they could not obtain in Pathaw village or in Pantanaw town. At that period in his life U Myaing used to drive a bus between Pathaw and the village on the bank of the river across from Pathaw. There was a cart track for a road, and they used to carry passengers at a rupee per head. In the rains this cart track became impossible and so they traversed this route only from TA-ZAUNG-BON to KASON months. U Myaing worked on this route for three summers. In the rains they shifted operations to the Maubin, Ye Le route, which was a 10 mile journey, and occasionally the 10 mile route from Ye Le to HSE-DEUNG-MAW. He worked at these places for two rainy seasons, from WAGO right up till the month of TA-ZAUNG-BON. The bus was owned by his cousin who collected all the earnings for each day. At that time bus drivers were hired at Rs. 45/- a month, plus sweet tea, food, shelter and one packet of cigarettes a day. "In Pathaw all the houses were too large and could accommodate a great many more people than they actually did. This was because each one erected his own building after the example of the other houses in the village. The person who hired the bus driver merely installed him in his house".

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This was when U Myaing was 17 or 18 years old. He was not paid anything, but the family was provided with everything they needed - food, clothes, etc. (U Myaing was still unmarried and the family consisted of two sisters, his mother and himself. (He did not marry till the age of thirty.) Both U Myaing and Daw Aw Zar estimated that the things they received from the bus owner would have amounted to much more than forty five rupees' worth.

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